

UNC OKs major plan to improve higher education in North Carolina

BY JANE STANCILL

jstancill@newsobserver.com

CHAPEL HILL

North Carolina's public university system has a new strategy for the Margaret Spellings' era, with goals that include enrolling more low-income and rural students, improving graduation rates and keeping an eye on affordability.

In a unanimous vote Friday, the UNC Board of Governors adopted a new strategic plan. The seven-page document has 11 main goals that will be the blueprint for Spellings, who took over as UNC president in March, and the 17 public campuses across the state.

Spellings called the plan a focused, disciplined road map, "not a dense, prescriptive list of absolutely everything we care about."

"We all agree that this university can do more to improve the quality of life and broaden opportunity for all North Carolinians," she said. "We can't be all things to all people everywhere, but we can tackle our core mission with urgency and excellence, and this plan does that, in my mind."

Within the next five years, the university has set out these targets:

- Increase enrollment of low-income students by 13 percent, and grow low-income graduates by 32 percent.
- Increase enrollment of rural students by 11 percent, and grow graduates from rural counties by 20 percent.
- Increase the number of students who graduate within five years by 5 percentage points, to 70 percent, and narrow the achievement gap.

- Survey students and alumni about their college experience and post-college jobs.
- Increase graduates in certain high-need fields by 25 percent – health sciences, K-12 teachers and science, technology, engineering and math graduates.
- Grow revenue from research grants and licensing by \$275 million.
- Each campus must create a plan to help a distressed North Carolina county.
- Limit tuition rate increases for in-state students to no more than the increase in median family income in North Carolina, based on a three-year average. In recent years that has been about 2 percent.

Despite the affordability provision, the plan leaves the door open for larger increases at campuses that “can demonstrate that the financial investment made by students, families and taxpayers is of excellent value.” That could lead to a more market-based tuition approach for the flagship campuses of N.C. State University and UNC-Chapel Hill.

“We want to really keep our eye on the ball and be sensitive to what families can pay,” Spellings said, “but we also want to understand the value proposition that people have before them at our flagships and every other institution.”

The affordability provision in the plan goes along with a new law passed by the legislature last year that sets a guaranteed tuition rate for students who make it to graduation in four consecutive years.

“We’re very interested, the legislature is very interested, everybody is interested in keeping tuition as low as possible,” said Lou Bissette, chairman of the Board of Governors.

The plan also stresses that there needs to be better collaboration among parts of the education system to ease students’ transition from K-12 schools to community colleges to universities. To that end, UNC will convene an education working group to present recommendations next year.

The strategy will guide UNC’s budget and policy agenda for the legislative session, including a request for millions of dollars for new data systems that Spellings said would help the university make better decisions about where to

target resources. UNC also wants to launch an internal competitive grant process to stimulate new thinking about how to improve on student success.

The university system also wants to streamline the way it operates through regulatory reform, cutting out bureaucracy and giving campus chancellors more latitude to make their own decisions. However, financial reporting would be increased to improve transparency.

Several board members during the past few days lamented that UNC campuses don't really have a good handle on how much it costs to educate students. They want more clear data on the full cost of getting a student to graduation and the variation in cost among the campuses.

On Thursday, two higher education experts from the Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation applauded the plan. They suggested that incremental change in higher education won't be adequate today, as other states are racing ahead on innovations, cost effectiveness and student success initiatives. One said UNC should return to its former glory and be a leader in expanding and broadening education.

"We're at a very different point in the trajectory in American history than we were just a short period of time ago," said Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of the Lumina Foundation. "The reality is that in today's economy and today's society, lack of a high quality postsecondary degree or other credential simply puts you at deep risk of being a permanent part of the poverty class of American society. That's just a fact."

Jane Stancill: 919-829-4559, @janestancill

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